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Journalists as spies

When Stansfield Turner, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, told the nation's newspaper editors in Washington, D.C., last week that he is not opposed to using journalists as spies, he ran into a buzz saw.

He said he resorts to such tactics only on rare occasions.

But in certain situations, Turner told the editors, reporters can freely move around and come up with vital information unavailable to the CIA through regular channels.

The editors howled. In fact, they were downright hostile to Turner. How dare he even suggest that a journalist's integrity be impugned? Men and women in such a noble profession have a higher calling than being used as spies.

The editors missed the point.

The issue must be kept in proper perspective.

Turner has no authority to order a journalist to spy for the CIA.

He only can ask.

The final responsibility on whether a reporter finds himself in the role of a spy rests with him. Any legitimate reporter would never accept a spying mission nor would his editor ever agree to such an arrangement. But you can't fault Turner for trying. In his work, he has to employ all available resources.

The editors who squawked about Turner should turn their attention to the big-name correspondents in the nation's capital who socialize with the newsmakers they are assigned to cover. Could this not cast a shadow over their professional ethics?

In the pursuit of a news story, a reporter will go to almost any means as long as they are lawful and honorable. Spying does not hold to these standards.

Turner should be lauded for not having tried to deceive the editors.